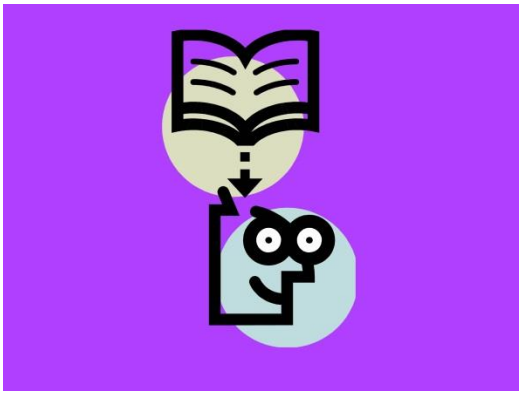
NIH Center for Scientific Review

peer review notes

january 2015

In this Issue

Insider's Guide to Peer Review for Applicants



With competition for NIH grants so intense, most applicants want to make sure they put their best foot forward when applying. To help them, we asked some study section chairs to help us update CSR's Insider's Guide to Peer Review, which provides applicant advice we collected from current and former chairs.

"It's really excellent because it provides practical insights into the process," said Dr. Richard Kitsis, former chair of CSR's Myocardial Ischemia and Metabolism Study Section. He is Dorros Professor of Medicine and Cell Biology, and Director of the Wilf Family Cardiovascular Research Institute at the Albert Einstein School of Medicine, Bronx, NY.

"I think the guide's suggestions all apply even more so as funding tightens," said Dr. William Dauer, Chair of CSR's Chronic Dysfunction and Integrative Neurodegeneration Study Section. He is a professor in the Departments of Neurology & Cell and Developmental Biology, and Director of the Morris K. Udall Center of Excellence for Parkinson's Disease Research, at the University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Harbor.

Here Is Some of the New Advice Added to the Guide

Don't overstate the significance of your research: It's great if you can say your results could one day have an impact on treating or preventing disease. But don't promise more than you can deliver. You really need to make more than a general case for significance. Explain the specific significance of the particular

question you're asking and how your results may fill important technical or knowledge gaps or otherwise impact your field

Make your aims sing and harmonize: Quickly lay out the broad context, the scientific question to be addressed, including its significance, and exactly how you propose to advance understanding of your problem. Craft your aims carefully so reviewers will see both their individual and synergistic worth

Focus your preliminary data: Insert a very succinct paragraph to explain what the preliminary data really tell you and how they show the feasibility of your proposed research. Make your application compelling by citing preliminary or prior work that shows the feasibility of each of your aims. Also, don't assume your reviewers will remember all your preliminary data from the significance section. If you have a lot, you may want to briefly refer to a key bit in your research strategy section.

Bottom Line

Dauer gave the bottom line on the Insider's Guide to Peer Review for Applicants when he said, "Obviously, the underlying science must be of high quality, and no amount of terrific writing will succeed in winning funding for work that is not well conceived or wanting in any other number of ways. But among much strong science, those applicants who can most clearly and compellingly communicate their message will be the ones that rise to the top of the pile."

Kitsis also noted that "sometimes even great applications do not make the pay line. The antidote is to not give up, and to try again."

Read the Complete Insider's Guide to NIH Peer Review

Got Some Great Advice We Didn't Give? Please send us an email: PRN@csr.nih.gov.

We thank Drs. Dauer and Kitsis as well as Dr. V. Jo Davisson for their input. Dr. Davisson is a professor of Medicinal Chemistry and Molecular Pharmacology at Purdue University in West Lafayette, IN. He has chaired the Synthetic and Biological Chemistry B Study Section.

NIH Simplifies Late Application Submission Policy

In special situations, NIH allows applicants to submit late applications. But in the past, it was difficult to know when the late submission window closed because different grant mechanisms had different windows. In addition, our old policy didn't allow late submissions for any Request for Applications (RFAs) or certain types of Program Announcements (PARs).

NIH now has a standard two-week window after application due dates when it might consider accepting a late application. Important details about the new policy for applicants and reviewers follow.

E-Submissions Made It Possible

In the not so good-old days, processing paper applications took a lot of time, and RFA and PAR applications arrived late in the cycle. A complicated and restrictive late application policy was necessary. The complete conversion to electronic submission dramatically reduced processing time and made our new policy possible.

What Applicants Should Know

- Most funding opportunity announcements now have a two-week late window when NIH may accept late applications. Note qualifications below.
- This new policy is effective for most applications submitted for due dates on or after January 25, 2015.
- Applications submitted for RFAs and PARs with special due dates published on or before December 17, 2014, will follow the old policy -- no late submissions.

There Is One Exception: New RFAs may "opt out" of the policy. If they do, they will state specifically in the Application Due Dates field of the RFA that "No late applications will be accepted for this Funding Opportunity Announcement."

What Are Acceptable Reasons for a Late Submission?

Specific reasons why an application may or may not be accepted late are spelled out in the NIH Guide Notice.

What Reviewers Should Know

The terms for qualifying review service have been changed under the new policy: Peer review service in the two-month period preceding or following an application due date is one reason a late application might be accepted. This means, for example, that if you have relevant peer review service between April 5 and August 5, you could be eligible to submit a late application for the June 5 deadline. ***You must put a cover letter on the application, explaining why it is late.***

Terms and conditions of the NIH Continuous Submission policy are not affected by this change to NIH's late application policy.

CSR Posts Webinar Videos for New Applicants

About 4,000 new NIH grant applicants seeking to put their best foot forward when applying for NIH grants participated in one of our four "Meet the Experts in NIH Peer Review" webinars we presented last November.

Feedback was tremendous, and we encourage you to check out one of the archived webinar videos or share the link with emerging researchers you know.

Four Webinars Geared to Applicants Seeking --

- Research Project Grants (R01)
- Academic Research Enhancement Awards (R15)
- Fellowship Awards (F30, F31, F32)
- Small Business Grants (R41, R42, R43, R44)

Five CSR/NIH Experts Gave Presentations on --

- The Big Picture Overview of NIH Peer Review
- What You Need to Know about Application Receipt and Referral
- How Your Application Is Reviewed
- Key Things to Know About Your Type of Application (See above list.)
- Jumpstart Your Career with CSR's Early Career Reviewer Program

The webinars conclude with Q&A sessions.

View the Webinars on CSR's Webinar Web Page

Things to Remember About R15 Application Reviews

Academic Research Enhancement Award (R15) grant applications have unique review criteria, and reviewers must shift gears to review them. R15 reviews are usually clustered to make this easier. But we know that even experienced reviewers sometimes need a little help shifting gears. So we offer up the following reminders.

Goals of R15 Grants: Support small-scale, meritorious research; provide research experiences for students; and enhance the environment at institutions of higher education that have not been major recipients of NIH support.

Key Features

- ***R15s are research awards -- not training grants. They support hands-on research experiences for students.*** You should see and assess plans to expose students to hands-on research but not detailed training plans like you would see in a fellowship or training grant application.

- ***R15s must involve undergraduate AND/OR graduate student researchers***. The aspects of the project in which students will participate should be identified.

- ***Postdocs are not considered students.*** However, postdocs, technicians, or faculty collaborators may be included.

- ***R15 are renewable and are considered career-sustaining awards.*** For a renewal, you should evaluate progress in research and whether research experiences for students have been provided.

- ***Preliminary data are allowed but not required,*** so you may consider it if it's present but not criticize an application if it's absent, unless it's an application for a renewal.

- ***Facilities & Other Resources available should be appropriate for the proposed R15.*** This section of the application should describe the student pool, the expected impact on the institution, special characteristics that make the institution appropriate for the R15, and institutional support. The focus here should be on the institution, not the PI's personal experience.

- **The Biosketch should describe the PD(s)/PI(s) experience supervising students in research.**

Evaluating Overall Impact

The goals of the AREA program are reflected in a unique set of review criteria.

Assessing potential Overall Impact is much different when reviewing R15 applications vs. R01 applications. Instead of assessing the likelihood for a powerful, sustained influence on the given research field, you should assess the likelihood for the R15 to make an important scientific contribution, how the project will provide research opportunities to students, and how it will strengthen the research environment of the institution.

Scored Review Criteria

As you evaluate the potential Overall Impact, you should consider five scored review criteria, which retain many of the elements you are familiar with from reviewing R01 applications, but review criteria also include elements specific to R15s. We have highlighted the unique aspects of R15 criteria below.

- ***Significance --*** How well could the grant strengthen the research environment and expose students to research?

- ***Investigator(s)*** -- Do the PD(s)PI(s) have suitable experience in supervising students in research?

- ***Innovation*** –- No specific difference from assessing innovation in R01 grant applications.

- ***Approach*** -- Can the project stimulate students' interest so they might consider a biomedical/behavioral science career?

- ***Environment*** -- Are qualified students available? Is there evidence that students have pursued or will pursue biomedical/ behavioral science careers?

There Is More to Know About Reviewing R15s

- Definitions of Criteria and Considerations for Research Project Grant Critiques
- Guide for R15 Reviewers

Helpful Links for R15 Applicants

- NIH's R15/AREA Web Page
- CSR's Recent R15 Webinar
- The AREA Facebook Page

New Videos for Reviewers to Better Navigate the Internet Assisted Review (IAR) System

New to IAR? Want to know what happens once you receive a meeting invitation from your Scientific Review Officer? Or how to access grant applications and meeting materials? Or look up potential conflicts of interest? We have just the tools for you.

A new series of video tutorials on navigating the IAR module is now available on the NIH electronic Research Administration (eRA) website and on the NIH Grants playlist on YouTube. The 9-part series gives you a brief overview of IAR, walks you through the steps for signing the confidentiality agreement, setting up your personal profile, submitting critiques and preliminary scores, submitting final scores, getting reimbursement and more.

The videos are short, lasting 2 to 8 minutes each. Please send feedback to eracommunications@mail.nih.gov.

Subscribe to Peer Review Notes: www.csr.nih.gov/prnotes
Send comments or questions: PRN@csr.nih.gov

Center for Scientific Review
National Institutes of Health
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services